

Cameroon: Media defies ban on political debate

Private media outlets in Cameroon are defying a ban on political programs imposed by the country's National Communication Council. The council had ordered the ban, insisting political debates may cause conflict ahead of senatorial elections on March 25.



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National Communication Council president Peter Essoka says Cameroon needs to promote peace, democracy and human rights, and needs to avoid hate speech. He says journalists may incite the population with one-sided reporting.

"Propaganda is when you go into elaborately telling about one political party and what they have done and all kinds of shouting on what they are doing. That is propaganda. Now, there must be a limitation. Let them [journalists] as much as possible be able to keep to these principles," said Essoka.

Public broadcaster CRTV and *Cameroon Tribune* have respected the NCC's order. But the Cameroon journalists' trade union president Denis Kwebo and other private media outlets described it as an attack on press freedom. Many radio and television stations have refused to respect the NCC instructions.

At Galaxy FM 93.5, a popular radio station in Cameroon's capital city Yaounde, heated debates on the senatorial elections to take place on March 25 are going on in a French-language political program called *Au coeur de la Republique*.

Political analyst Jean Jacques Ola Bebe says the station has defied instructions from the NCC and is ready to face the consequences.

He says as an analyst, he cannot accept that someone should restrain freedom of speech in a country that says it wants to be fully democratic. He says the pillar on which any true democracy should stand is freedom of expression and that Cameroonians need to listen to and question all candidates for the senatorial election on their political plans and ask the balance sheet of outgoing senators.

Cameroon has more than 500 newspapers and 100 radio and television stations.

NCC secretary-general Jean Tobie Hond says the outlets who ignore the instructions will be punished.

He says they are calling on such media outlets to make sure there is some balance in what they are doing, so the campaign for senatorial elections remains democratic and goes on hitch free. He says if they continue to favor or give preference to some political parties, their media organs will be suspended.

Last year, Cameroon's National Communication Council suspended 35 journalists and media outlets, accusing them of failing to respect professional norms and ethics. Some of those punished had criticized the government's handling of the crisis in the English-speaking regions. Others criticized senior state functionaries over the use of public funds.

Source: Voice of America.

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